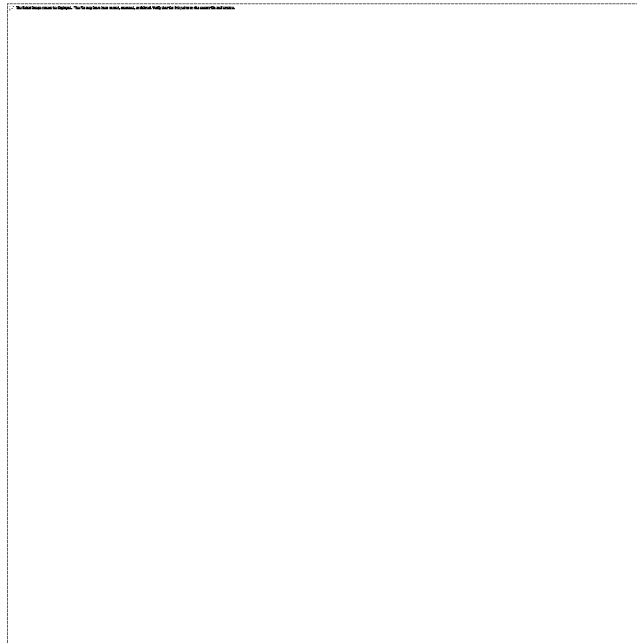


Message

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Remarks by President Biden at a Delaware Veterans Summit and PACT Act Town Hall | New Castle, DE



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

December 16, 2022

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT BIDEN  
AT A DELAWARE VETERANS SUMMIT AND PACT ACT TOWN HALL

Major Joseph R. "Beau" Biden III National Guard/Reserve Center  
New Castle, Delaware

12:31 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Tom, thank you. Please sit. I always call -- I've been calling Senator Carper "Tommy" for 40 years, and I call him "Tommy." And (inaudible), "Who? Who you talking about?" (Laughter.) I'm talking about my buddy, a dear friend, a

combat veteran, a guy who serving in the Senate, and he gets it. He gets it. And that's why he's hosted events like this for decades as a U.S. senator and, before that, as congressman.

I also want to thank Chris Coons.

I'm going to use this mic if I can. Is this one working?

I also want to thank Chris Coons and Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester. Thanks for their friendship and their leadership.

And, John Carney, you're doing a hell of a job, pal. (Applause.) But I have only one regret. He used to work for me. He left and became governor. What the hell? (Laughter.) I mean --

SENATOR CARPER: Me too!

THE PRESIDENT: (Laughs.)

And, General Berry, thank you for having us today. It means so much to me for --

And I must tell you, I -- I ride by this building a lot, getting Air Force One to fly back and forth to Washington and wherever I'm going. And it always leaves me with a little bit of a lump in my throat. My wife's last warning today when I -- she's still in Washington where there's 1,200 people showing up at the White House beginning at noon. I'm going to be there a little late.

But -- and she said, "Joe, don't get emotional." Not that I ever get emotional. (Laughter.)

But it means so much to me, and it meant so much to Beau.

Frank Vavala was Beau's Adjutant General and a great friend, and I want to thank General Vavala as well. (Applause.)

What I want to do -- there's a guy here that flew 25 missions -- 25 missions in World War Two -- over Germany. First Lieutenant, young guy. (Laughter.) A hundred and two years old. Ray? (Applause.) And guess what? He lives in Elsmere! (Applause.) And my claim to fame is I used to be his county councilman.

Ray, thanks for being here, pal. You're the best. You're the best.

MR. FIRMANI: Thank you so much.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. I may be Irish, but I'm not stupid. (Laughter.) I married Dominic Giacoppa's daughter. So, you know, I got a little Italian in me now, you know? (Laughter.)

The -- but it is remarkable. Ray flew 25 B-17 bombing runs during World War Two -- and, I might add, won the Distinguished Flying Cross. (Applause.)

Ray, you were part of the -- what's referred to as the Greatest Generation. But there's no generation in American history more than this present and recently past generation that have been deployed more, have given more than the generation represented by the people we're going to be looking at and honoring today.

No -- nobody has been in a situation where they show up for -- they have one deployment, and then two and three and four, and sometimes five and six.

One of the last times I flew into Iraq, I went up in the cockpit. And they fly me with what's called a "Silver Bullet" when you fly the President, and there's a special container in the plane they stick you in.

And I went up with a -- I went up with a group, and I was telling this to Beau's father-in-law and my grade-school friend who's sitting right there -- and he's taping it all because he's going to use it against me here -- (laughter) -- Ronnie Oliver.

But -- and I said, "How many of you is this your first deployment?" Nobody raised their hand. And the -- and the crew was in there as well, the flight crew. And I said, "How many second employment -- deployment?" Nobody raised their hand. "Third?" Three. "Fourth?" Two. "Fifth?" Four. It doesn't happen very often. And these kids keep going, getting back up.

One percent -- 1 percent of them defends 99 percent of us. One percent. And I think that doesn't take a single thing away from the World War Two veterans' generation.

But I want to tell you, it is -- it is -- it doesn't go noticed enough, how many of you who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and all

through these last wars we've had -- how many mothers and wives and sons and daughters sat at that empty birthday -- saw that -- an empty chair at the birthday party.

And the difference is a lot of you of my -- my generation, on -- after -- on December 7th that we celebrated the bravery of all the -- those who showed up. On the Finnegan side of the family, four brothers. Every single one volunteered the very next day, on Monday, to join. My uncle, Frank Biden, joined. My father was working in the shipyards.

The fact of the matter is that, you know, it wasn't a second thought. They just showed up. And there's a generation, represented by you, Ray, that doesn't look for accolades.

You know, I -- my dad, when I got elected Vice President, he said, "Joey, Uncle Frank fought in the Battle of the Bulge." He was not feeling very well now -- not because of the Battle of the Bulge. But he said, "And he won the Purple Heart. And he never received it. He never -- he never got it. Do you think you could help him get it? We'll surprise him."

So we got him the Purple Heart. He had won it in the Battle of the Bulge. And I remember he came over to the house, and I came out, and he said, "Present it to him, okay?" We had the family there.

I said, "Uncle Frank, you won this. And I want to..." He said, "I don't want the damn thing." (Laughter.) No, I'm serious. He said, "I don't want it." I said, "What's the matter, Uncle Frank? You earned it." He said, "Yeah, but the others died. The others died. I lived. I don't want it."

Just like a generation -- this generation in Vietnam -- excuse me, in -- in Iraq.

I was up at one of the points, and they asked that -- the C- -- the CO asked me if I would pin on a Silver Star because a young man on one of these points had -- had one of his colleagues shot, fell down about, I guess, the equivalent -- I was st- -- I was out there at the point. And out -- it was, I guess, about 150 feet -- not straight down but a hill. And this young man climbed down the hill, put a guy on his shoulder, and brought him back up and was shot at on the way up.

And he got there. And I went to present it to him too, and he said, "I don't want it. I don't want it. He died. He died."

You understand what I'm talking about, don't you? It's real.

So these are women and men who are enormously consequential to not only the physical safety of this country, but the character -- the character of America. It's who we are. It's who we are. You're the blood, bones, sinew -- you're the backbone of America.

And, you know -- and we have a -- my colleagues have heard me say this for a long, long time. We've a lot of obligations as Americans. But we only have one sacred obligation. Obligations of the old and the young to educate, to take care. But only one sacred obligation, and that's prepare those we send to war and care for them and their families when they come home from war. And I mean that. And I know my colleagues mean that from the bottom of our heart.

The reason I called Denis, who is one of the most qualified people I've ever worked with in Washington, and asked him to become -- head up the VA nationally is that I've, like all of you in the VA have been hearing, get a phone call: "My husband... my son... my daughter is really in trouble. She's got to come in. Got to see her." "Well, she'll be able to come in in 10 days or two weeks."

More people have died from suicide -- suicide -- suicide -- than any other cause in the last three to five years. So I called Denis. I said, "Can we fix this, pal?" That was the start. We increased the federal budget larger than it's ever been increased, two years in a row, for the VA. Because we owe it. (Applause.)

We've reached out to docs, nurses, specialized surgeons to come in to the VA, expand the expertise. There are good people there. They're all good people. But they increase it. And I think we're making progress. I think we're making genuine progress.

And, you know, I think that there's a -- I've been in and out -- not as a, obviously, combatant -- but in and out of Afghanistan and Iraq and these areas 38, 39 times as -- not as President, only twice as President, but from the time I was a senator, but particularly when I was Vice President.

And, you know, it was pretty clear to a lot -- there was a lot of discussion, as some of you remember, about these burn pits. You all know what a burn pit is? It's a hole between 8 and 10 feet --

as high as 12 feet deep. The size of a football field. A great big rectangle. And every damn ugly thing in the world is burned in it. Everything. Everything. Toxic waste. Everything.

And I'm no doctor, but it's pretty clear a lot of guys and women are getting sick.

And so, you know, one of things is these poisonous chemicals, jet fuel, and some places some other things that I won't mention. A toxic smoke was thick with poison, spreading in the air and into the lungs of our troops.

And many of them, when they came home -- many, when they came home, had gone -- the best-trained, fittest warriors in the world -- and came home with headaches, numbness, dizziness, cancer.

Remember Beau calling and saying how he collapsed on a run? Well, you know, Beau's father-in-law, as I said, Ronnie Olivere, my friend, is here. So are several members of the Guard who served with Beau in Iraq.

This is personal to them and it's personal to all of us. And it's not unique to me and my family. So many are here today and around the country.

Secretary McDonough can tell you we're determined -- we're determined to do something about this come hell or high water. And I mean that.

I made it real clear to the United States Congress: If they didn't pass this damn burn-pit bill, I was going to go on a holy war. Not a joke.

And I want to thank -- we asked -- we have to thank someone for this that helped a great deal who's not here: Jon Stewart. Jon Stewart -- (applause) -- made a gigantic difference.

And Denis and others and I went to -- on the Capitol steps with groups -- and maybe some of you were part of that. Thank you. And you were there, and you stayed there. And you insisted that they vote on it because some of our friends were not willing to do this, but you insisted. And finally -- and finally, you know, they stepped up.

It was part of my agenda that I announced in my State of the Union message to rally the country together. Beating -- and I shouldn't name -- I mentioned four things. And I said, number one, I thought

-- I tried to find things that everyone could agree on, in a non-partisan way, that were critical.

One was dealing with the opioid epidemic in America. Two was tackling the mental health crisis, which is real, in America. Three was ending cancer as we know it, because we are making significant progress and investing billions of dollars now to find cures. And thirdly was support our veterans, because the need was great and the number was in the billions.

Well, I delivered that speech in March. In August of this year, the bipartisan PACT Act was on my desk to sign into law. And it's one of the most significant laws in our history to help millions of veterans who were exposed to toxic substances during their military service.

And, you know -- and it got done because veterans and families -- some of the families here -- rallied the nation, rallied the country to get it done.

After I signed the bill -- some of you may have seen the picture because we play it on television a lot -- I handed the pen over to the widow -- the child of Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson. A beautiful little girl. Usually you hand the pen you sign with to the lead sponsor of the bill. And I handed it to her, and she held it and looked, and she gave me a kiss and said, "Thank you for my daddy. Thank you."

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a family who suffered a great loss but turned their pain into purpose so other families wouldn't have to experience the same thing. And that's courage. That's character, in my view. And that's who we are. That's what defines us.

We're the most unique nation in the history of the world because we're the only one who's a product of an idea -- not geography, not religion, not ethnicity -- an idea. We the people "hold these truths to be self-evident that all men [and women]..." We've never fully lived up to it, but we've never walked away from it.

And the people who's protected it are the most -- are you people sitting in front of me.

You know, we learned a horrible lesson after Vietnam: how the harmful effects of Agent Orange. A new generation, understandably, doesn't focus on that very much.

But you know the biggest problem with Agent Orange? It dropped on a hell of a lot of people's heads, and they got all kinds of illnesses. But they couldn't prove it. They had to be able to prove it. You had to have the scientific background to be able to dig in and prove it.

Well, because of Tommy and because of others in the -- were serving with at the time, we insisted that you don't have to -- if you -- all you have to do is prove you were impacted by. It landed on your head, figuratively sp- -- no, I'm serious. Nothing else to prove. Nothing else to prove.

Because why should the burden be on the victim to demonstrate the problems they've suffered since then are because of that Agent Orange when other people weren't suffering those things?

So, folks, that's why you heard me say earlier that, you know, when Tom and I supported the Agent Orange Act, that was -- it's hard to believe, Tommy, that was 1991. You're getting old, man. (Laughter.) I don't know.

SENATOR CARPER: Forever young!

THE PRESIDENT: (Laughs.) Supporting veterans exposed to harmful substances, like we saw in Vietnam.

Now the PACT Act brings us one closer to fulfilling that sacred obligation. It empowers the VA to move more quickly to determine if a veteran qualifies for the benefits of the law. And the benefits are real. They're real benefits, like exposure screenings. If you came back and you're -- and not in a bag, but out walking -- you came back, you're exposed, you get the screening. It means new facilities, new research, more healthcare workers at VA hospitals.

And for families who suffer the ultimate loss, it means potential access to life insurance, tuition benefits, home loan assistance, monthly stipends. And it's real. It's not small. It's what we should be doing.

It says, if -- for example, if you're a spouse of a surviving veteran who died -- a veteran who died from a toxic illness, with two children, you can be eligible for \$2,000 a month to help with those children.

It'll never make up for the price -- the piece of the soul you lost, but it is important, those kids.

I was talking to someone a little bit earlier, without naming them, and, you know, there's tuition benefits. If, in fact, you go to a state university and your child -- a child of someone who's died, then you get free state tuition.

If you go to a private university, you get up to \$26,000 a year. It matters.

You qualify for VA Home Loans.

You -- and just the bottom line is -- you all know it. Many of you know it, and many of you are victims of it. When you lose one of the breadwinners, it leaves a gigantic hole. And when that hole is left because they served all of us, we deserve, they deserve to have it filled, or try to fill it.

So, passing the Pass [sic] Act -- the PACT Act was the first step of being -- making sure that we leave no one behind. We also need to pass the bipartisan government funding bill so we can deliver on the law's promise. There's a little bit of a -- anyway, you'll hear it in the press.

I wanted to come here today -- but I got to go back quickly today to the sign a few pieces of legislation -- but during this PACT Act Week of Action, to spread the word that every veteran of a surviving family member knows how access to these benefits are made possible.

The law -- and because of these conditions have already taken such a toll on so many veterans, I have directed the Department of Veterans Affairs to treat all 23 -- all 23 of the presumptive conditions in this law as applicable immediately.

I'm urging all veterans of these decades of war to enroll in the VA healthcare to get screening for toxic exposure and to promptly file your claim.

And for those who may have been watching at home, because the press is here, visit: [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT) -- P-A-C-T. [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT) -- P-A-C-T.

And like you heard from Secretary McDonough, the VA will move as quickly as possible to resolve your claim and to get you the benefits you've earned.

Here at the Beau Biden National Guard Reserve Center, where Jill and I stopped to say goodbye to Delaware as we were about to be sworn in in Washington, D.C. to take our Oath of Office, is an

appropriate place, from my perspective and Jill's, to be able to continue to push for implementation of this PACT Act.

And there's no place -- there's no place I'd rather be today to get the message out about the PACT Act than home here, and here in this particular facility.

God bless you all. And may God protect our troops. Thank you. (Applause.)

12:56 P.M. EST

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